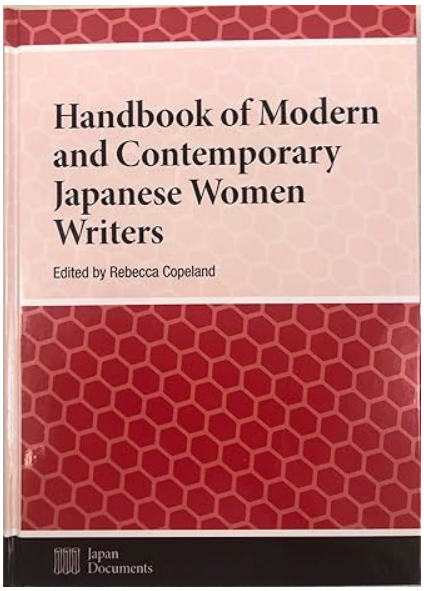
Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific
Issue 51, November 2024
http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue51/roussel_review.pdf
doi: https://doi.org/10.25911/6T2D-HA80



Rebecca Copeland (editor)

Handbook of Modern and Contemporary Japanese Women Writers

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023
ISBN: 978-90-4855-835-3, xxxl + 402 pp.

reviewed by Flora Roussel,
flora.roussel@umontreal.ca

Handbook—a hand in women's empowerment

A handbook is usually a reference work on a specific subject.[1] The monumental overview offered by editor Rebecca Copeland with her *Handbook of Modern and Contemporary Japanese Women Writers* fulfills that endeavour. By bridging time periods (from the Meiji period to the present, including rewritings of 'classical' works of premodern literature), genres (novel, short story, nonfiction, drama, poetry), and authors (both internationally known and lesser-known) from Japan, Copeland's volume follows in the footsteps of Chieko I. Mulhern's *Japanese Women Writers: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook*[2] by actualising its topicality in order to respond to the urgent need—in a time of constant backlash against gender and feminism[3]—to reinvest spaces of literature. In twenty-four chapters arranged

[1] *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. Handbook, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/handbook.

[2] Mulhern's volume, the first of its kind in English, traces Japanese literature written by women as far back as the Nara period, while, in the absence of possibly 'corroborat[ing] the attribution' of works, it offers entries starting from the Heian period onward. See Chieko I. Mulhern, *Japanese Women Writers: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook* (Greenwood Press, 1994), vii–viii.

[3] See, for instance, Ayako Kano, *Japanese Feminist Debates: A Century of Contention on Sex, Love, and Labor* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2016).

in eight parts (genre blending, classical rewriting, trauma, food, family, age, imperialism, environment, (un)writing borders), it succeeds in broadening the horizon of literature written by women in Japan. Indeed, it avoids the too easy and stereotypical association of women writing with certain themes (such as domesticity or care), tropes (e.g., passivity, love), and genres (especially fiction). For instance, in 'Chapter 8. Voicing Herstory's Silence: Three Women Playwrights—Hasegawa Shigure, Ariyoshi Sawako, and Dakemoto Ayumi' (113–28), contributor Barbara Hartley examines how women refused to 'comply with mainstream—that is, hegemonic masculine—demands' (118) of the literary establishment through their choice of settings and themes: they criticised the erasure of 'women' in theatre and, when they did appear, their treatment as mere objects of male gaze and pleasure.

In most of the chapters, the topic of empowerment, albeit not necessarily linked to a feminist perspective or goal, drives the analyses to their political implications, at least in the literary sphere. In this sense, this handbook is very much the heir to the collection *The Woman's Hand: Gender and Theory in Japanese Women's Writings,*[4] in that it puts the emphasis on gender dynamics that constrain, captivate, or complicate literary creation. While Julia C. Bullock's 'Chapter 11. Watching the Detectives: Writing as Feminist Praxis in Enchi Fumiko and Kurahashi Yumiko' (161–75) interrogates the 'discursive effect of the text' (162) as a means of feminist resistance through its interweaving of writing and gender, Jon L. Pitt's 'Chapter 22. Teeming Up with Life: Reading the Environment in Ishimure Michiko, Hayashi Fumiko, and Osaki Midori' (341–56) analyses the relationality of living beings and creatures across categories to critique gender dualism while remaining aware of other forms of domination (e.g., colonialism and imperialism).

General readings—from distance to closeness

The *Handbook of Modern and Contemporary Japanese Women Writers* illustrates the great diversity of topics, genres, and authors that nourishes literary creation. From distance to closeness, the contributors offer general readings about knowledge, power, and gender. At the same time, they propose more detailed insights into the works of women writers in Japan. To implement this general reading, each chapter focuses on at least two authors and provides readers with a brief review of the work that has been done on these authors as well as with autobiographical aspects tied to historical contexts—given that some authors come from different periods (as in the case of Quillon Arkenstone's 'Chapter 2. Writing Within and Beyond Genre: Ōkura Teruko, Miyano

[4] Paul Gordon Schalow and Janet A. Walker, *The Woman's Hand: Gender and Theory in Japanese Women's Writings* (Stanford University Press, 1996).

Murako, Togawa Masako, Miyabe Miyuki, and Minato Kanae and Mystery Fiction' (18–32) or Emily Levine's 'Chapter 4. Tales of Ise Grows Up: Higuchi Ichiyō, Kurahashi Yumiko, and Kawakami Mieko' (51–65)). This distance to the texts is overcome through a close reading of exemplary texts according to specific themes. Noteworthy is the volume's endeavour to touch upon neglected issues, such as agism to criticise gendered inequality (e.g., Sohyun Chun's 'Chapter 16. Writing the Aged Woman: Enchi Fumiko and Tanabe Seiko,' 242–55) and to resist the dominant perspective through irony, satire, and parody (e.g., Tomoko Aoyama's 'Chapter 17. Humor and Aging: Ogino Anna, Itō Hiromi, and Kanai Mieko,' 256–71).

Further, Copeland's volume creates a stage for debate. On the one hand, it supports multiple perspectives on the same author. For example, three contributors devote a section to Murata Sayaka on the topics of exaggerating and subverting reproductive politics (Kazue Harada's Chapter 3 with the 2015 novel *Shōmestsu Sekai/Dwindling World* (33–47)), of rejecting motherhood altogether for an equal relationship (Amanda C. Seaman's Chapter 13 with the 2014 short story 'Seiketsu na kekkon/A Clean Marriage' (195–208)), and of offering queer modes of existence beyond the gender binary (Anna Specchio's Chapter 14 with the 2016 *Konbini Ningen/Convenience Store Human,* 209–23). On the other hand, Copeland's volume presents critical insights into 'controversial' authors as an attempt to be transparent and accurate to historical events. In particular, 'Part 7: Colonies, War, Aftermath' articulates the intricacies of gender politics in the light of imperialism and colonialism. For instance, Noriko J. Horiguchi's 'Chapter 18. Women and War: Yosano Akiko and Hayashi Fumiko' (275–93) addresses the ambivalent roles of renowned authors to highlight the fact that 'some women tried to improve their status … both by resisting and by incorporating nationalism, militarism, and the empire' (276). Thus, the Handbook does not take a neutral position on literature; rather, it invites us to further interrogate the complexity of gender dynamics in order to avoid biased readings. This feature makes the Handbook a useful tool for active (re)reading.

An open book—inviting for more

Apart from the great diversity of its topics (e.g., disaster, identity, desire, literary creation, etc.), the *Handbook of Modern and Contemporary Japanese Women Writers* also includes voices that have been marginalised. It pays particular attention to Zainichi literature and Okinawan literature written by women, which allows for an intersectional consideration of gender in relation to race and sexuality. In 'Chapter 23. Women and the Ethnic Body: Lee Jungja, Yū Miri, and Che Sil' (359–73), Christina Yi's analysis shakes up 'the heavily male-dominated canon of Zainichi literature' (359) by stressing the liminal belonging of Zainichi women writers and their characters between identities, while facing racist and

sexist discrimination. Laudable also is Davinder L. Bhowmik's 'Chapter 20. Women and Aftermath: Koza as Topos in Literature from Okinawa—Tōma Hiroko, Yoshida Sueko, and Sakiyama Tami' (309–23) for its focus on the literary representation of an Okinawan town occupied by the largest U.S. military base in Japan—a focus that sheds light on colonial and war history, social class, and female agency. Racism outside of Japan experienced by Japanese is only briefly explored in the work of Takahashi Takako in Pedro Thiago Ramos Bassoe's 'Chapter 24. Transnational Narratives and Travel Writing: Yoshimoto Banana, Takahashi Takako, and Yi Yangji' (374–88), while questioning the meaning of transnationality in relation to gender and belonging.

Although a handbook must at some point choose which themes, tropes, and genres to discuss, rely on scholars' proposals, and aim not to 'cover everything but to cover enough to provide readers access to the creativity, versatility, and concerns shared by modern and contemporary women writers' (xxii), more, it seems, is needed. For instance, Copeland's volume does not include oral literature and Ainu literature. Yet, recent studies in English—as the Handbook is intended for an Anglophone audience—reveal the vitality of such literatures.[5] The examination of other(ed) literatures can indeed overcome the rigidity of literary disciplines that all too often consider only *written* literature, which, in turn, is shaped by 'classical' works by male authors. Moreover, such a move can revitalise the study of genres that may be overlooked in curricula, especially oral literature and theatre, by going beyond the primacy of fiction in Japanese literature in translation (most of the chapters in the volume focus on fiction). As an essential work that promotes women writings, the *Handbook of Modern and Contemporary Japanese Women Writers* nonetheless challenges curricula in its scope and timely publication, while leaving pages open for scholars to continue defending literatures written, performed, and transmitted by women.

[5] See, for instance, Sarah M. Strong's work on Ainu translator and transcriber Chiri Yukie, who has dedicated her life to preserving and transmitting '*kamui yukar* (chants of spiritual beings) … [which are] oral performance narratives' (*Ainu Spirits Singing: The Living World of Chiri Yukie's* Ainu Shin'yōshū, (University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 3–4)). Beyond the literary realm, ann-elise lewallen's study of Ainu cultural production by Ainu women as a way of shaping their identity in order to resist settler colonialism by Japan is worth mentioning for its intersectional analysis (*The Fabric of Indigeneity: Ainu Identity, Gender, and Settler Colonialism in Japan* (School for Advanced Research Press and Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2016).

References

Kano, Ayako. *Japanese Feminist Debates: A Century of Contention on Sex, Love, and Labor.* University of Hawai'i Press, 2016.

lewallen, ann-elise. *The Fabric of Indigeneity: Ainu Identity, Gender, and Settler Colonialism in Japan.* School for Advanced Research Press and Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2016.

Mulhern, Chieko I. *Japanese Women Writers: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook.* Greenwood Press, 1994.

Schalow, Paul Gordon, and Janet A. Walker. *The Woman's Hand: Gender and Theory in Japanese Women's Writings.* Stanford University Press, 1996.

Strong, Sarah M. *Ainu Spirits Singing: The Living World of Chiri Yukie's Ainu Shin'yōshū.* University of Hawai'i Press, 2011.